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Inclusion in the General Education Classroom

In Europe and across much of the developed world, inclusive education is a recognized model for educating students with disabilities (World Report on Disability, 2011). Similarly, in many parts of the United States, students with disabilities are being integrated into general education classrooms throughout all grade levels. According to the recent report by the National Center for Education Statistics (The Condition of Education, 2012), approximately 95 percent of school-age children and young adults in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (aged 6-21) attend classes in public school settings. This upward trend is in direct response to advocacy efforts and growing research (Carter, Moss, Hoffman, Chung, & Sisco, 2011) as well as legislative mandates, including the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) (PL 108-446) (2004), which obligate the states to provide students with disabilities with education in general education classes.

Despite advances that have been made to promote inclusive education, anxieties about, and negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities still exist in educational settings (Ramseyer, 2002). Therefore, it is necessary for teachers and educators to engage students in critical reflection about these issues in classrooms (Humphrey, 2008; Prunty, Dupont, & McDaid, 2012). A review of research on social competence in primary inclusive classrooms (McCay & Keyes, 2001/2002) reveals a significant increase in the frequency - but not necessarily the quality - of interactions between students with disabilities and their age-appropriate peers, as a result of implementing inclusive education. Hall and McGregor (2000), who longitudinally studied peer relationships among students with disabilities and their peers in an inclusive classroom during kindergarten/Grade 1, and again during upper elementary

grades (10-13 years of age), detected another area of concern. These researchers observed that although the students with disabilities received a similar number of nominations to be a playmate and participated in similar types of play activities compared to their typical classmates during kindergarten/Grade 1, the positive trend did not continue for upper elementary grades. In the upper-level grades, students with disabilities received fewer total nominations on this sociometric measure than was typical for their peers.

Litvack, Ritchie, and Shore (2011), who examined inclusive classroom attitudes toward disability among students with disabilities, when compared with their average-achieving and higher-achieving peers without disabilities, initially found no statistical difference between these two groups. However, when they delved deeper, using a qualitative semi-structured interview, they found that high-achieving students were more likely to report a reduced amount of learning in inclusive classrooms, when compared with the responses of average-achieving students. Fifty percent of high-achievers also felt that the instruction was delivered at a slower pace. Nevertheless, in terms of attitudes toward classmates with disabilities, average- and high-achieving students overall depicted comparable kinds of interactions with their peers with disabilities; however, one third of average-and high-achieving students who were interviewed indicated very limited or no existing relationships between these two groups.

In addition, research indicates that students with disabilities are easy targets for bullying (Cho, Hendrickson, & Mock, 2009). Others are at risk for such negative attitudes as name calling (Mills & Carwile, 2009). In the most recent publication, Nowicki and Brown (2013) concurred that students with disabilities are more likely to experience social isolation, negative attitudes, prejudices, or become victims of bullying behaviors.

Given this situation, the need to continue to increase awareness of disabilities and disability issues is crucial. Developing awareness and understanding will ultimately lead to high quality social relationships and interactions among students with and without disabilities in today's inclusive classrooms within and outside the U.S.

Bibliotherapy and Comics

One way to increase the understanding of students with disabilities and promoting social acceptance is through bibliotherapy (Pardeck, 2005). The basic concept behind bibliotherapy is to read children's books and discuss (with an adult facilitator such as teacher, counselor or librarian) challenging and uncomfortable topics or social issues that the characters encounter in these texts. Students can thereby process and find solutions to difficult and complex issues in their own lives. As such, bibliotherapy supports students' socio-emotional growth by allowing them to connect with issues that are presented in stories they read (Iaquinta & Hipsky, 2006; Prater, Johnstun, Dyches, & Johnstun, 2006). In addition, bibliotherapy has been found to be an effective approach to increase disability awareness and the acceptance of differences (Cook, Earles-Vollrath, & Ganz, 2006; Pardeck, 2005). Within this context, bibliotherapy is often used to introduce diverse disabilities to students in classrooms and communities and also to help take away discomfort and/or fear of differences among students with and without disabilities. Cook, Earles-Vollrath, and Ganz, who conducted action research in their classroom (2006), reported that students exposed to bibliotherapy demonstrated more inclusive behaviors toward their peers with disabilities in their daily interactions than students who did not participate in such an intervention.

In this work, we build on the work of Cook, Earles-Vollrath, and Ganz's (2006) research and Pardeck's (2005) scholarship, as we explore the potential of bibliotherapy in the inclusive

classroom. However, we apply this approach to the reading of comics literature (Norton, 2003), rather than other literary texts. For our purposes, comics literature is defined to include comic books, comic strips, as well as graphic novels and manga (a long-standing Japanese comic strip tradition). We include in-print comics, such as the recent *Silver Scorpion* (2011) graphic novel series, and other media, such as television, where comic series such as Nickelodeon's *Pelswick* (2001) have been popular.

Comics Literature, Children, and Disability

Research has identified humor in cartoons, and similar genres, that are age-appropriate for students with and without disabilities (Fitzgerald & Craig-Unkefer, 2008). For example, Fitzgerald and Craig-Unkefer (2008) found that young students, both with phonological impairments and without language impairments, were able not only to understand and appreciate pictorial humor, but also to produce humor themselves. Age-appropriate and cognitively accessible humor also serves social and emotional functions. For instance, it has helped children to deal with their anxieties in a safe manner (Zecee, 1995). In studying youth with disabilities from the U.S. and Syria as they created a comic book series, *The Silver Scorpion*, Karr (2013) observed that the experience helped the participants (and their readers) to "contextualize personal issues of disability and human rights by applying communal discussions to shared stories and visuals" (p. 185). This comic book creation experience also supported the participants' disability identity development via the authentic representation of disability identity through the *Silver Scorpion*. The researcher concluded that the *Silver Scorpion* comic series may well serve as a role model among students with disabilities on how to engage an audience in a dialogue about disability experiences through storytelling and visual modes of expressions.

Norton (2003) also saw community building as a benefit to using comic literature with older students. Specifically, Norton (2003) examined the *Archie* comic book series read by students with different backgrounds and abilities and reported that they created informal reading communities to share their love for reading comics literature. Norton (2003) further pointed out that these young readers developed a habit of exchanging comic books among themselves and telling their stories regularly. As a result, the researcher concluded that informal comics reading clubs may contribute to promoting tolerance and building inclusive behaviors. Low (2012) posits too that comics may assist students in developing pro-social behaviors among older students.

Empathetic scholarship, as well as the growing number of scholars who concentrate on comics and graphic fiction within disabilities studies (Birge, 2010; Squier, 2008) demonstrate the potential for comics to help young people understand cognitive disabilities and autism. These pieces of graphic literature also help replace stereotypes of cognitive disability (e.g., the "supercrip," or superhero with a disability) with more nuanced and authentic representations of individuals with disabilities. Research has also shown that comic strip conversations improve the social skills of students with autism (Rogers & Smith Myles, 2001) as well as with mild/moderate learning, cognitive and behavioral disabilities (Pierson & Glaeser, 2005). In fact, Pierson and Glaeser (2005) examined the impact of comic strip conversations upon elementary students with difficult social behaviors. They reported an increase of awareness of social situations and a decline in negative social behaviors among these participants.

Hoffman (2008) also observed a positive attitudinal change in students whose teachers used comics in early childhood special education settings. In these settings, he observed teachers successfully building social connections among students, motivating students during instruction, increasing student self-esteem and confidence, and successfully managing negative and

disruptive behaviors. Using experimental study design, Smetana and Grisham (2012) discovered that graphic novels were an effective tool in improving reading comprehension, vocabulary, word recognition, and oral reading fluency among students who had learning disabilities. In addition, reading graphic novels has been found to increase motivation and achievement among students with hearing impairment and learning disabilities (Gavigan, 2011; Smetana, Odelson, Burns, & Grisham, 2009).

Furthermore, there is strong evidence for the use of comics with children and youth without disabilities as a means by which they might understand, appreciate, and accept individuals with disabilities (Karasik & Karasik, 2004; Montague-Reyes, 2007; Seidler, 2011). This is because comics invite the former group of readers to enter the world of people with disabilities and to experience, however vicariously, the disability issues that these individuals face in their daily lives.

Promoting inclusive education with comics literature also reflects a commitment to basic human rights as described in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child (n.d.), including the right to participate fully in family, cultural, and social life. Recommended guidelines by the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC), known as the Professional Ethical Principles, Practice Standards, and Professional Policies (2010) suggest "promoting meaningful and inclusive participation of individuals with exceptionalities in their schools and communities" (p. 1).

Comic books appeal to young people of either gender, since they depict both male and female superheroes and other protagonists. For instance, in a review of graphic novels from the Young Adult Library Services Association's "Great Graphic Novels for Teens 2008" list, Irwin and Moeller (2010) found a balanced representation of gender. Of the sixteen total characters,

nine were female and seven were male, and one was of indeterminate gender. The researchers also reported a diversity of disability represented in this collection, including at least one character from the following disability categories: visual impairments (three characters), orthopedic impairments (three characters), emotional disturbance (two characters), specific learning disability (one character) and other health impairments (seven characters).

An additional rationale for using comics in the classroom comes from literacy research. For instance, in a study on seven- and eight-year-olds making comic books, Stoermer (2009) found that when these students were engaged in reading and creating comic books, their language arts and literacy skills were strengthened. Lyga (2006) suggested that improvement in the following literacy skills occurred when students were engaged in reading comics literature: sequencing, decoding nonverbal communication, comprehending plot, and ability to make inferences. Ranker (2007) identified a positive impact of comic literature on English Language Learners, and Liu (2004) established that low performing English Learners were able to recall more information (38.70%) when high-level text was paired with comics. The recall was only 19.41% with low-level English Learners when only the traditional readings were used.

The Common Core State Standards (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2010) now explicitly call for the use of alternative media, including graphic novels, in the curriculum. To illustrate, Gavigan (2012) found that graphic novels are represented in English language arts Common Core State Standards in these grades: Grade 2, Reading Standard 7; Grade 5, Reading Standard 7; and Grades 6-12, Reading Standard 10 (p. 21). Similarly, the Multicultural Literature Curriculum Map of the CCSS (2012) states that students must be familiarized with multicultural literature and culturally-responsive teaching to expand their understanding of diverse cultural experiences, including disability literature. Appendix B of the CCSS for Literacy

in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects recommends informational and traditional texts that portray experiences of previously marginalized groups as well (Chiariello, 2012*).*

In this article, we suggest examples of activities related to increasing understanding and social acceptance of students with disabilities through exploration of comics literature. We also discuss comics literature that portrays diverse disabilities to help teachers and educators instruct students about various types of disability and disability issues.

Educating about Disabilities

Many students, without (and even some students with) disabilities, have little or no real exposure to information about the many types of disability that can exist (Matthew & Clow, 2007). They thus may have little or no authentic knowledge about disabilities they do not possess, their peers who may have them, or disability in general. A comic book series, *Medikidz* (Chilman-Blair & DeLoache, 2010), which is written for children ages 8-15 years old, can assist teachers in helping students learn about different conditions such as autism, asthma, ADHD, epilepsy, brain tumors, or diabetes in an informative way.

For example, in *What's up with Ben? Medikidz Explain Autism* (Chilman-Blair & DeLoache, 2010), a comic book from this series, students learn about autism and the symptoms associated with this disorder in the areas of social interactions and verbal and nonverbal communication. The book introduces the reader to the topic by telling a story of Ben, a child with autism, and his sister Brooke's efforts to understand why Ben does not want to play with her and other kids. In one such moment of frustration, when Ben does not respond to Brooke's invitation to play cricket outdoors with other kids, a girl standing on the sidelines whispers to another kid, "What's his problem?" (p.1). Brooke gets help with this question from a team of

"medikidz" superheroes who magically show up on that difficult day. The superhero Medikidz takes Brooke and her brother on a journey on a special "medi-jet" to "Mediland," more specifically, inside the brain, to teach her about her brother's autism. The rest of the book explains the causes and the symptoms of autism. It also helps Brooke to understand how to celebrate Ben's strengths and how to help him with some of his weaknesses.

The illustrations and the story presented in a simple language in this comic book provide additional visual and textual supports that will benefit both students with and without disabilities, especially if they are struggling readers or readers with significant cognitive delays and challenging behaviors (Jaime & Knowlton, 2007). By increasing all students' comprehension and participation, teachers will also be able to nurture acceptance and inclusive behaviors in the classroom. Further suggestions and descriptions of activities for reading *What's up with Ben?* are provided in Table 1. A list of additional children's comic books is provided in Table 2. Insert here Table 1 and Table 2

Learning to See the Real Person beneath the Disability

Although understanding the unique needs of students with disabilities is necessary, many conversations about students with disabilities through comics literature explorations should aim at helping students with and without disabilities to get to know the real person beneath the disability, especially when the protagonist in the story also has a disability. Scholarship on disability portrayal in children and youth literature (Altieri 2008; Blaska 2004; Gervay, 2004; Kaiser 2007; Williams, Inkster, & Blaska 2005; Sauer & Kasa, 2012) recommends that explorations of such literature in the classroom should move beyond viewing and defining characters with a disability primarily in terms of their disability. Rather, classroom discussions about characters with disabilities should encourage an understanding of disability "as a natural

part of human diversity, merely another bodily [or mental] attribute, and one that we can frame in positive terms" (Connor & Bejoian, 2006, p. 52).

According to Haller and Ralph (2003), such humor application serves a "normalizing" purpose because the characters with disabilities are not depicted differently from all the other characters without disabilities (para 4). At the same time such application of humor serves an "equalizing" purpose because the characters with disabilities are equal to all the other characters without disabilities when it comes to their status and humor production skills (Haller & Ralph, 2003, Conclusion and Discussion, para 5).

The recent cartoon series written for pre-teen and teen adolescents "*The Special Needs Gang*" (2012) by the VHIconnect.org serves this goal well since it continues the tradition of authentic representation of children and youth with disabilities. In these comic strips, the main characters represent a range of disabilities (including developmental disabilities) and have an array of personalities. They, just like characters without disabilities, can be serious or silly, frustrated or pleased with life, and accepting - or not - of their disabilities. Children and youth in these series, like any other children, participate in daily activities, socialize with peers and others, and develop friendships and relationships with children with and without disabilities. They just happen to have a disability.

Teachers can ask students to analyze these cartoons and to identify the strengths and abilities of a character they choose who has a disability. This analysis will help students to become aware of the interests and dreams of their peers with disabilities. To facilitate this analysis, students can fill out a chart (e.g., Venn diagram/ T-chart, or story map) that will list the strengths and abilities of their character with a disability in the comic strip in one section of the chart, and their own strengths and abilities in another section. Teachers might have to make

additional curriculum modifications with students who have reading difficulties or specific disabilities to help them process and comprehend the story presented in the comics.

For example, students with hearing impairments will benefit from hearing the information being presented through sign language or an interpreter. Students having learning disabilities will value the information presented in more than one modality, such as when a teacher uses visual strategies (e.g., handouts, diagrams, or graphic organizers) in addition to a more traditional discussion (Kluth, 2008; Jaime & Knowlton, 2007). Chandler-Olcott (2008) suggests using note-taking guides and direct teacher modeling to assist students in making visual inferences when reading comics. Such guides may take the form of a graphic organizer with three sections: a) the visual information the student can find in her comics; b) the information that the student has retrieved from his/her head; and c) what the student thinks they might mean together.

Alternatively, students may be asked to choose only one panel at a time from a comic book for a close read. They would then conduct - first with the teacher, and then with a peer - an analysis of that panel's content. Versaci (2008) recommends combining single-panel analysis with a series of class discussions on topics such as composition, spatial organization, panel size, shape, and the type of borders found there. He also suggests analysis of certain features of comics, such as distance, shading, color, and the style of drawing, to support students' comprehension of both visual and textual features within the panel. As students become more skilled in applying such visual analysis, teachers should move to analysis of a series of panels with more difficult comic content.

For students with more significant cognitive disabilities, however, teachers may cut out the comic strips into single-panels and ask the students to arrange them in sequential order to tell

the story of the comic strip. Of course, the size of comic strips can also be enlarged for accessibility and readability purposes, and text inside the bubbles can be simplified (Seidler, 2011). All of these examples of adaptations can be equally effective for students without disabilities in inclusive settings.

Next, students should be encouraged to share their charts with the class, affirming the strengths and abilities of the cartoon characters with disabilities. During the sharing time, teachers should focus on the child in character just as with any other child his/her age and the adventures the character experiences, reinforcing among children the idea that unique talents and abilities – not disability - define individuals with disabilities (Prater & Dyches, 2008).

Table 3 provides additional strategies for helping students understand and connect with the lived experiences of people with certain disabilities through oral storytelling. Insert here Table 3

Sapon-Shevin (1999) argued for the need to examine not only differences, but also similarities between students with and without disabilities. A classroom that is a catalyst for promoting commonalities, rather than emphasizing differences among students with and without disabilities, is the key to building inclusive communities. Reading and discussing comics literature can be a means to this end. For instance, while presenting the cartoon series "*The Special Needs Gang*" (2012) to their students, teachers may also ask students to find commonalities between those cartoon characters with disabilities and their own traits, habits and desires. They may use the Characteristics Comparison chart or another visual graphic to structure this search for similarities. This activity allows students without disabilities to recognize that they and students with disabilities are much more alike than different. The activity can thus help these students develop positive and accepting attitudes toward those who may be perceived by

them as different (Prater & Dyches, 2008). Smith and Sapon-Shevin (2008-2009) defined the use of cartoons in this way as having a normalizing effect on the audiences since the activity emphasizes commonalities and regular lives rather than differences.

Including Students with Disabilities in Conversations about Disabilities

When implementing a unit on disability awareness, the teacher should bring into the discussion students with disabilities. The goal for this step should be to invite students with disabilities to share their perspectives on disability. Letting students with disabilities share their experiences with disability can bring more meaning and legitimacy to disability awareness conversations. It also allows students with disabilities to be in control of the message that they would like to communicate about disability to their peers without a disability. Karr and Weida (2012/2013) recommend inviting students with disabilities to create their own comic books that feature characters with disabilities, and to use this medium to help peers understand each person's disability and disability issues. Toward this goal, students with disabilities may create superheroes or super heroines with disabilities that challenge common misconceptions. In this way, they further promote understanding and acceptance of individuals with disabilities.

To facilitate student design of comic books, we suggest that teachers provide an example of a comic book series available to them from their school library, or use the examples suggested in this article. Then, they should follow these steps, which we have adapted from *The Comic Book Project* (http://comicbookproject.org/):

> *Step 1: Getting Started*—Introduce students to the comics series by reading selective episodes. Or, if available, watch the selective episodes from the selected comics series online. Next, discuss with students how the main character with a disability is portrayed in the comics series. Make sure to point out stereotypes and misrepresentations in the

story, drawing attention to authentic representations and appropriate behavior, communication, and etiquette.

Step 2: Brainstorming Ideas for and Writing the Comic Book—Have students with disabilities think of a superhero or super heroine and the things they like about their hero or heroine. Next, invite students to sketch their character for the comic book, and to decide on the story they want to tell about their character. After that, they may write the plot and dialogue. Students will need access to these resources: Blank comic book panels or comic strip layouts and the design tool for creating comics, *The Comic Creator* (http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/games-tools/comic-creator-a-30237.html).

Step 3: Completing the Comic Book—Help students finalize their character sketches, select appropriate colors for the backgrounds, and re-write the narrative, if necessary. Help them to brainstorm catchy titles and make appealing covers for their comic books. Encourage these young authors to narrate their comic books orally in the classroom and invite peers to ask questions. Provide supports for students with disabilities who may have difficulty with either presenting or conversing with their peers. Examples of support include providing verbal or written prompts for retelling a story (e.g., "What is the story about?"; "Who are the characters?"; "What are the main events?"; "Where do the events take place?"; "What happens at the end?"; "Why did you write the story?") as well as asking and answering questions (e.g., inviting response and opening conversation - "What do you like about the story?"; "What questions do you have about the story?"; answering questions - "That is an interesting question…"; "Well, let me see…"; asking

for clarification -" I did not follow what you said about…?"; or avoiding answering - "I'd rather not answer that one, if you don't mind.").

Step 4: Sharing the Comic Book with Others—Consider inviting students with disabilities to share their comic book creations beyond the classroom, including audiences on platforms such as blogs or wikis, i.e. to continue the conversation about disability representation from the perspectives of those who have a disability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues nonetheless need to be considered for students, especially those with disabilities, who participate in disability awareness activities. According to some research, disability awareness activities, such as simulations undertaken without debriefing, can induce emotional discomfort for the participants (Kiger, 1992). For this reason, it is critical that teachers communicate with parents and students with disabilities about introducing disability awareness activities into their general education curricula. They should ask parents for their input in conducting such activities. Teachers should also check into local and state programs that are already implemented in their communities to extend the dialogue about meaningful and ethical disability awareness programs and curricula. For example, some schools may have already adopted formal disability awareness programs such as *The Kids Like You, Kids Like Me* (Mickel & Griffin, 2007) that support deeper understanding and acceptance of disabilities among teachers and students. *The Kids Like You, Kids Like Me* program consists of a structured series of learning activities matched to students' cognitive abilities and learning styles. Some of the activities in the program include creative simulation engagements, lectures, inclusive social gatherings, journaling, interactive disability discussion panels, and skits (Mickel & Griffin, 2007).

Educators may supplement such a formal program with comics literature as they develop lesson plans to stimulate student interest and to expand the reading material.

Potential paralleling emotional risks exist also for those participants without disabilities who, when engaging in open and candid dialogue with each other about disabilities, may reveal personal reactions indicative of prejudice or a deficit-oriented mindset, which could be detrimental to their overall social interactions with teachers and students with disabilities (Herbert, 2000; Kiger, 1992).

Research (e.g. Hall, 2007) nevertheless shows that this ethical dilemma can be avoided when educators create safe classroom environments where individual privacy is respected, and when they incorporate short but goal-driven debriefing sessions after any type of disability awareness activity. Goal-driven debriefing sessions should have a very specific purpose to be effective (Chard, 1997 cited in Herbert, 2000). Keeping this in mind, educators should determine whether or not a proposed disability awareness session will focus on addressing feelings, attitudes, or the societal and environmental barriers that might restrict the proper functioning and interactions of the student with a disability and thus degrade his or her well-being.

Bickart, Jablon, and Dodge (1999) recommend that students' feelings and reactions be acknowledged and treated with respect. It is possible for educators to help students verbalize their feelings about and reactions towards characters with a disability without making value judgments. Instead, teachers may coach them about how these feelings and reactions may be interpreted by others. The teacher can use prompts such as the following to accomplish this: "What did you learn about a character with a disability from the comic book that you have just read? How did you feel about this character's disability? Name these feelings. Why did you feel this way? Do you think the character would feel the way you feel? Why? Why not? In what ways

are your experiences alike or different from those experienced by the character with a disability?" Students without disabilities may simply not be aware of how their actions and reactions may be hurtful and offensive to their peers with disabilities. Or, they may merely have longstanding but inaccurate perceptions about disability.

Bickart, Jablon, and Dodge (1999) also advise that teaching social and emotional competencies should go hand in hand with teaching academic competencies. These include expressing one's feelings and emotions, recognizing feelings and emotions in others, relating to others, asking questions without the fear of failure, and using effective problem-solving skills when tackling challenging situations. These are prerequisites for building inclusive classrooms and communities, and should result from creating emotionally safe and mutually respectful debriefing sessions.

The ultimate point of any goal-driven debriefing session should be a promotion of empathy, that is, a student's ability to see and understand issues related to disability from another person's perspective or, to use Howard's (2006) words, by "seeing others in their own light rather than through our own projections of them in our light" (p. 79). Reading comics literature accompanied by goal-debriefing sessions will allow students without disabilities to see and vicariously experience the worlds of those who live with disabilities daily without stumbling over guilt or fear of expressing their own feelings and reactions. It should also result in their becoming knowledgeable about respectful styles of communicating with and being around students who have a disability. Feeling more comfortable around students with disabilities will, in turn, provide the context for transforming negative attitudes toward disability to positive ones.

Parental Involvement and Disability Awareness with the Help of Comics Literature

Both parents of children with and without disability can be involved in encouraging and promoting disability awareness and advocacy activities at home and school. Karr's (2009) *It's About Ability: Learning Guide on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Its_About_Ability_Learning_Guide_EN.pdf) can be used to facilitate such parental involvement. The guide offers a variety of child-friendly activities on topics ranging from human diversity, respect for the individual, home and family supports, inclusion and community, to social change and advocacy that can be used to ensure participatory disability awareness process, learning about *the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* and empowerment within and outside home environments. We describe here an example of an activity from this guide, *Equal Inclusion,* which parents can do with their children. This activity invites the children to examine inclusion in everyday life and gives examples of how to remove environmental barriers in order to ensure access and equal participation of individuals with disabilities in daily life tasks and the society. Parents can present their children with picture scenarios with an elderly person, a person in a wheelchair or a person with a visual impairment and ask the following questions that the guide suggests:

What could be done differently so:

an elderly person can get up to the house with steps more safely, comfortably and independently;

a person in a wheelchair can use the lavatory;

a blind person can find his/her way;

Who else would benefit from each one of these accommodations? (Karr, 2009, p. 32).

Next parents and children can review definitions and examples of assistive technology on the website sponsored by the Family Center on Technology and Disability (http://www.fctd.info/) to

deepen their understanding of how physical environment can support the full participation of individuals with disabilities in their daily living tasks and activities.

After completing the activity, both parents and their children can re-read the comics series of their choice and identify in it the physical supports and assistive technology devices in the home, school and the local community, that are available to the main character with a disability in the story, and that exist to include him fully in everyday life tasks and social life. If needed, parents can also brainstorm what changes need to be made to the physical environments, if the same access and equal participation for individuals with disabilities are not provided. Parents can further discuss with children how these physical supports in the environments would be beneficial to everyone and not only individuals with disabilities. To conclude this activity, parents might invite their children to examine their own home and local communities for evidence of the physical supports for individuals with disabilities.

Inviting parents of children with and without disability to engage in these types of disability awareness activities with the help of comics literature will contribute to disability awareness and advocacy as well. The more that parents of children with and without disabilities, students, and the world communities are involved in disability awareness and disability advocacy, the more individuals with disabilities' rights will be protected.

Conclusion

Comics literature can provide an unbiased view into the lives of those with disabilities, as it makes visible the stories of those who have been largely silenced, overlooked, or marginalized. It also introduces students to the dialogue about disability representation from a strength-based perspective rather than a stereotypical one. Reading comics in this manner can be infused into the regular reading curriculum or as a supplement to the special education or inclusive

classroom. When used as reading material in class, teachers might embed comics literature into thematic units centered around topics such as diversity, getting to know each other, and community building. Other important and related topics are racial and ethnic identity, difference and sameness, human relationships and behavior, and friendship and animosity. Comics can be used as part of the literature response in literature circles, with students collaborating in small groups as they analyze the comic books they read in class, taking on different roles and responsibilities such the questioner, vocabulary finder or summarizer. Students might also explore comics as a genre through genre study, paying attention to how both textual and visual information within text is used to tell a story about an individual with a disability. Also – and this is desirable - this familiarity means that students may wish to read comics literature for pleasure during free time at school or at home.

Professionals such as school counselors or librarians as well as parents and guardians may choose to use comics literature as a supplemental text, to scaffold conversations on topics such as interpersonal communication, social acceptance and inclusion, bullying, exclusion, and loneliness. Important progress toward conflict management and resolution among students with and without disabilities can also occur via this avenue.

As evidenced by a growing body of research (Prater, Johnstun, Dyches, & Johnstun, 2006; Seidler, 2011), comics can function strongly as mentor texts. A mentor text is that which serves as an illustration of different disability issues and that is also a model for teaching appropriate attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. These texts can facilitate negotiation of complex topics and help students with and without disabilities to gain insight, perspectives and experiences other than their own and to increase acceptance of differences. This in turn leads to better behavior and more satisfying social interactions and relationships with others. For all of

these reasons, disability and comics literature should receive more (and more welcoming) attention from teachers, teacher educators, school counselors, and parents of students with and without disabilities.

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Table 1

Activities for Exploring Autism with What's up with Ben? Medikidz Explain Autism

Goal: To help understand autism and ways to accept and support peers with autism

Activity	**Description/ Standards***
Introduction To introduce the topic and to probe students' prior understanding of autism.	Introduce the topic using copies of images on page 1 of the comic book. Ask students to describe the characters Brook, Ben, and other kids in a whole class discussion. Invite students to consider the key issue in the opening scene (Kids are playing cricket, but Ben is not part of the group). *Discussion Prompts*: Who are the characters and where are they? What are they playing (Cricket)? What is cricket? (see this brochure for basic information about this game presented in a kid-friendly language: http://www.cricketamerica.com/pdf/english.pdf) Are all kids involved? Why do you think Ben does not play with other kids? Standards*: **RL.1/RI.1** Ask and answer questions about key details in a text. **RL.3/RI.3** Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details. /Describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text. **RL.7/RI.7** Use illustrations and details in a story to describe its characters, setting, or events. **SL.1.2** Ask and answer questions about key details in a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.

Reading To provide students with accurate information about autism and to provide scaffold to process this information.	Read aloud an excerpt from the comic book and discuss it using this question: What is up with Ben? Students will learn that Ben has autism. Read further to find answers to these questions: What is autism? How does one develop it? Is it anyone's fault? Next invite students to read in pairs (partner reading) the rest of the comic book and to record on post- it- notes the information they find about autism in the book. Standards: **SL.2** Determine the main ideas and supporting details of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. **Rl.6/RI.6** Distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or those of the characters. / Distinguish their own point of view from that of the author of a text
Poster Creation and Whole-Class Discussion To support student learning about autism, clarify areas of confusion and answer questions.	Use a large poster to capture the information students gather about autism from reading the comic book. Place a copy of a cut-out image of Ben in the center of the poster and draw speech bubbles with these prompts: What is autism?; What are the common signs of autism?; What can you and others do to help your friends who might have autism? Invite students to place their post-it-notes with the questions they answer. Create a reading circle and invite students to share with class aloud bits of the information they found. Encourage comments and questions from students throughout the discussion. Standards:

	RL.6/RI.6 Identify who is telling the story at various points in a text. / Distinguish between information provided by pictures or other illustrations and information provided by the words in a text. **SL.1** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
Extension: Comic Strip Creation To review what was learned and to provide structure and independent learning opportunities.	Provide students with blank comic strip templates (http://donnayoung.org/art/comics.htm) and invite them to draw: in row one, activities Ben, (and children like Ben) can do well (e.g., can focus on details); 2) in row two, activities with which Ben has difficulty (e.g., Ben may not want to play with other kids at all); and 3) in row three, activities that can help Ben. Ask students to provide a caption for each drawing. Standard: **W.1.6** Explore digital tools to produce and publish writing.

* Legend to the ELA-Literacy Common Core Standards (CCSS): RL (Reading Literature)/RI (Reading Informational Text); SL (Speaking and Listening); W (Writing).

Table 2

Comics literature about Disability and Disability Issues

Book/ Cartoon/Comics	*Disability Category*
Asperger's syndrome explained for children (cartoon). Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9eATBV-_lg&feature=player_embedded	Asperger's Syndrome/ Low Incidence Disability
Krukar, J., Gutierrez, K., & Balestrieri (2013). *Melting down: A comic for kids with Asperger's disorder and challenging behavior*. Highland Park, IL: RTC Publishing.	Autism/ Low Incidence disability
Chilman-Blair, Taddeo, J., & Hill, P. D. (2010). *Medkidz explain ADHD* (Superheroes on a medical mission). London, UK: Medikidz.	ADHD/ High Incidence Disability
Shirley, D. (2008). *Best friend on wheels: A concept book.* Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman.	Physical Disability/ Low Incidence Disability
Jones, C. (Director). *Looney Tunes: Golden collection volumes 1 & 2*. (2004). [Cartoons Classics DVD]. Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers. **Note:** Review in particular the scenes with a Porky Pig character who stutters.	Speech Disorders/ High Incidence Disability
Filitti, J. (2006). *Out of this world: Hey Max, pay attention.* Chapin, SC: Youthlight.	ADHD/ High Incidence Disability
Sumerak, M. (2006). *Teen Titans: Introducing Sara Hunter*. DC Comics & Sparktop.	Dyslexia, Learning Disabilities/ High Incidence Disability

Table 3

Activities for Learning with The Special Needs Gang through Oral Storytelling

Goal: To help students without disabilities to understand and connect with the lived experiences of people with disabilities

Activity	**Description/ Standards***
Introduction To introduce the comic strip, *The Special Needs Gang*, and the characters in it.	Introduce the comic strip (http://www.vhiconnect.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=itemlist&layout=category&task=category&id=56&Itemid=415) and the characters with disabilities: Apolonia (Apol), Enrique, Esteban; Blake, Calvin, Randy, and Marilyn. Ask students to describe the characters in a whole class discussion. Invite students to consider the aspects of characterization in the comic strip such as appearance, behavior, and the use of dialogue and objects in support of character roles. **Standards*:** **RL.1/RI.1** Ask and answer questions about key details in a text. **RL.3/RI.3** Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details. /Describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text. **RL.7/RI.7** Use illustrations and details in a story to describe its characters, setting, or events.
Reading To provide students with scaffold to process the story.	Ask pairs of students to select and review a story with characters with disabilities from the *Special Needs Gang* comic strips. Invite students to get to know the characters and the question or issue their story deals with. Next invite students to prepare to retell the story orally. Ask them to consider voice, posture, and gestures for different characters, assemble props, where appropriate, and plan to engage the audience (classmates) in storytelling by inviting them to answer a question, echo the lines from the story, or announce transitions at certain times during the storytelling. Build in time for rehearsal.

	Standards: **SL.2** Determine the main ideas and supporting details of a text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. **Rl.6/RI.6** Distinguish their own point of view from that of the narrator or those of the characters. / Distinguish their own point of view from that of the author of a text.
Storytelling & Performance Evaluation To provide feedback.	Prepare the stage for storytellers in the classroom and invite students to retell their stories. Provide students in the audience with the following storytelling evaluation criteria: **Storyline** The story has the beginning, middle and end and deals with a key question/issue. *Excellent Good Acceptable Weak* Comments:_____ _____ **Characterization** Uses voice, posture, and gestures, props, and other devices in support of character roles. *Excellent Good Acceptable Weak* Comments:_____ _____ **Presentation** Speaks clearly and fluently and engages the audience in storytelling in some ways (e.g., inviting them answer a question, echo the lines from the story, or announce transitions). *Excellent Good Acceptable Weak* Comments:_____ _____

	Standard: **SL.1** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
Whole-Class Discussion To encourage learning about the lived experiences of characters with disabilities.	After each presentation, ask these questions: What did you learn about the characters with disabilities and their lives? In what ways can characters with disabilities inspire you? Encourage additional questions from students throughout the discussion. **Standard:** **SL.1** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
Extension To scaffold student independent learning.	Ask students to bring to class two objects that represent them, their interests, abilities, or dreams. After the storytelling session, students should also select two objects for one of the characters with disabilities and discuss the differences and similarities between themselves and the character, based on the objects they chose for themselves and for the character with a disability. Bring to class some objects for students to choose from. **Standard:** **SL.1** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

* Legend to the ELA-Literacy Common Core Standards (CCSS): RL (Reading Literature)/RI (Reading Informational Text); SL (Speaking and Listening).